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TAGS: PREL PGOV SNAR KJUS EAID HO  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR'S MEETING WITH HONDURAN SECURITY  
MINISTER RODAS

Classified By: Ambassador Hugo Llorens, reasons 1.4 (b & d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: In his introductory meeting with Honduran Minister of Security COL Jorge RODAS Gamero (ret.), the Ambassador laid out his vision for a coordinated, bilateral effort to make the most of the Merida Initiative and tackle Honduras' growing crime and security challenges. For his part, Rodas expressed his full agreement with taking a coordinated approach. He asserted his commitment to public security, law enforcement, and the struggles against drug trafficking and gangs. Rodas said he and the GOH saw the United States as a strategic partner in these efforts. He explained what he saw as his biggest challenges to improving security and fighting crime, namely, a need for greater coordination with his GOH military and judicial counterparts and improved local radar capacity in the remote Mosquitia region where narcotraffickers are most active. End summary.

¶2. (C) The Ambassador hosted Minister of Security Rodas for an introductory lunch on October 24. Rodas expressed his commitment to security, law enforcement, the anti-drug effort and the struggle against the growing threat of gangs. He said that for him and the GOH, the United States was a strategic partner in all these efforts. Rodas noted that the principal challenge in Honduras was growing criminality and violence in the country associated with drugs and drug trafficking, and that the GOH had a responsibility to tackle this problem. He went on to say the major obstacle he faced in his ministry was police ineffectiveness, noting that opinion polls showed the police were near the bottom of all the country's institutions in terms of the public's respect and confidence. Rodas said the media had an aggravating factor in this, reporting only the sensational cases of crime, and not acknowledging the police successes in breaking up major kidnapping rings and lowering the murder rate. He pointed out that in the past year, the police had caught most kidnappers, and as result, the rate of kidnappings was down, as was the murder rate, though both were still unacceptably high.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador expressed USG appreciation for the cooperation all elements of the Mission have had with their GOH counterparts in the area of security and law enforcement. He informed the Minister that there was bi-partisan support in the U.S. Congress for the Bush Administration's Merida

Initiative. He said Senators, Representatives and staffers agreed that Merida was an opportunity for the United States, Mexico and the Central American countries to work together to fight the common threat of crime. The Ambassador said Merida would serve as a tool for the GOH to use in their own fight against this threat. He added that the Administration and Congress, in close consultation with the governments of Mexico and Central America had come up with a good set of projects to focus on: prisons, border controls and information sharing. The Ambassador noted that Merida showed how President Bush understood how drug traffickers could undermine Honduran democracy, and that, in turn was a threat to U.S. security.

¶4. (C) The Ambassador stressed that Merida would be a great opportunity for the United States and Honduras to work as partners to tackle the common security threat of crime and crime networks -- both the drug traffickers and the gangs. To that end, the Ambassador said a priority task was the creation of an Embassy inter-agency working group to advance our Merida agenda. (Note: Details on this working group will be described septel. End note.). The Ambassador added that we planned to propose to President Zelaya the U.S. and Honduras needed to adopt a "two-country, multi-agency approach" to fighting international crime and that we hoped to establish a bilateral task force approach to implementing Merida. Our proposal was for the Merida Task Force to serve as the bilateral coordinating group on this initiative. The Ambassador noted that we hoped that President Zelaya would designate an official to serve as coordinator for the Honduran side.

¶5. (C) Rodas concurred wholeheartedly with this vision, and said he would discuss with President Zelaya his own desire to be given the authority to bring all GOH agencies together on operational matters. He said this pointed to one of two major hurdles he faced in his law enforcement and security work: the Honduran police (HNP) and military (HOAF) efforts to intercept narcotics transit lacked reaction time abilities. Rodas explained that narcotraffickers primarily entered Honduras by the air or sea into the remote, undeveloped northeastern part of the country known as Mosquitia, where there are no major roads or other infrastructure. He needed to coordinate with his GOH counterparts in the area of intelligence, communication and mobility if he was to be effective in intercepting traffickers. He said his second hurdle was the ability to track incoming flights to that region -- at present, the US and GOH had to rely on the CNIES remote radar system based in the United States. A radar system based on the north coast of Honduras was critical to track aircraft coming into the Mosquitia, and would improve GOH cooperation with the USG's DEA and Joint Task Force Bravo (JTF-B) assets to intercept these traffickers. Rodas added he supported the goal of basing a Tactical Response Team (TRT) at JTF-B to speed response time, but that funding was a problem for him.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: Rodas has been one of the USG's staunchest supporters in the Zelaya Administration. He developed a reputation during his military career as a fervent opponent of corruption, often to the detriment of his own career, and he has carried that same attitude into his role as overseer of the HNP and other security forces. He has previously expressed his support for major reforms of the HNP to make them a more effective, professional force. He has been limited in his ability to do so, however, due to a lack of support from above -- in both authority to act and funding. Rodas is likely to remain Minister of Security past 2010 if Liberal candidate Micheletti becomes the next President, and Nationalist front-runner Pepe Lobo's stated choice for Minister of Security Jorge Alvarez has a similar outlook toward security efforts. Therefore, we can expect continuity and support for the Merida initiative in this government and the next. A coordinated bilateral effort through a Merida Working Group will maximize our returns and aid the growth and continuity of GOH partnership. End comment.

